Synopsis

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The Womanist Manifesto for Co-existence in the Nigerian Society in the Novels of Sefi Atta

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Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly,
without claiming it, she stands up for all women.
– Maya Angelou

Literature has been a sophisticated tool in the hands of the writers to illustrate society's misogynistic view regarding women for thousands of years. The recurring motif is of the males abusing women for their own ends, wielding their oppressive authority to make women feel subordinate. The article "Oral and Written Literature in Nigeria" by Bade Ajuwon, which can be found in *Nigerian History and Culture*, explains that a verbal art civilisation previously flourished in preliterate Nigeria, receiving the ardent support of both traditional leaders and the general populace at its pinnacle. The oral tradition functioned as the people's bank for preserving their prehistoric experiences and beliefs during a time when writing was not even established.

Western influences started impacting Nigerian literature with the spread of Arabic ideas and culture in Africa in the seventh century AD. During the nineteenth century, Christian missionaries increased the immigration of western education to Nigeria. Native black Muslims, who felt threatened by white Christians, protested with poetry.

In the early nineteenth century, authoring novels and other creative works were not considered attractive professions in Nigeria. But the writing profession's rewards made it incredibly appealing as the century came to a close. As a result, it attracted more male writers; but the number of women who wrote books drastically decreased. Many women were drawn away from fiction writing, taking up a bigger role in non-fiction. Women frequently struggled

with gender inequity and restrictions on their writing styles. Male authors particularly, came out with unfair criticisms if women writers failed to satisfy predetermined standards for writers.

The efforts of contemporary and second-generation writers deserve appreciation for the positive transformation that took place in women's roles in literature from the traditional portrayal of the status of women as people always relating to or depending on others, particularly men, for every decision, to the 'New Woman' who acquires a well-controlled determination to get what she wants via her own articulations.

Novels began to emerge across the nation about 1930. Hausa books, referred to as "non-realistic novels," were based on folktales featuring wonderful, supernatural human and faerie characters as their primary focus. The "mystery" figures changed into different creatures and interacted with fairies, animals, and people. The establishment of the University College of Ibadan in 1948 led to a significant literary movement from fantasy to reality. University-educated academics who advocated a new literary movement brought in these changes. The transition to realism was pushed by conferences, journals, and media.

Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe were among the many English-language novelists from Nigeria. *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's debut book, released in 1958, chronicles the sad breakdown of Igbo clans as a result of the entrance of the Europeans. The work is heavily infused with Igbo folklore, maintaining the African aspects despite the English style.

Space and time were the major obstacles for women writers, especially black females, when they tried to write. The societal environment did not encourage the ladies to express their artistic talents. However, black female authors began to appear in the literary arena in the 1960s and 1970s.Therefore, it is heartening to know that this generation of writers recognises women's significant contribution to society and is motivated to overcome the historical, cultural, and

mythical hurdles to accurately portray them as individuals beyond what is ascribed to them as biological species.

Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land* was the first novel by a black woman to be published. Gradually, black female writers like Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, Mariama Bâ, Grace Ogot, Efua Sutherland and Buchi Emecheta initiated the advent of women's writing. One of the well-known authors, still advancing Nigerian literature, is Sefi Atta who, with her significant contribution to Nigerian literature, has carved a niche for herself focusing her attention more on women and their problems.

Sefi Atta, born in January 1964 in Lagos in Nigeria divides her time between the countries of the United States, England and Nigeria. With a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing from Antioch University, Los Angeles, she is qualified as a Chartered Accountant in England and a Certified Public Accountant in the United States. She was a juror for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 2010. Besides being a novelist, Sefi Atta is also a playwright, with her stage plays performed and published internationally; the BBC has broadcasted her radio plays. A winner of PEN International's 2004/2005 David TK Wong Prize, Atta also received the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa in 2006 for her debut novel *Everything Good Will Come*, the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa in 2009 for her short story collection, *News from Home* and several other literary awards for her works.

Sefi Atta, with her adroit narrative power and characteristic arches, exerts the womanistic portrayal of female characters in all her novels. She has to her credit, five novels, one collection of short stories, and many stage plays and radio plays. *Writing Contemporary Nigeria: How Sefi Atta Illuminates African Culture and Tradition* is a critical study of her novels and short stories

published in 2015 by the Cambria Press. The current research focuses on Atta's womanist writings, postcolonial experiences, societal pressures on women, and their path to empowerment.

Thesis Statement:

The deprivation of basic human rights and the unjust treatment of fellow human beings in terms of gender, colour, class, race, religion, and culture opprobrium are the cruellest forms of oppression. The research focuses on unveiling the oppressed voices, escalating their issues to the world tracing out the postcolonial traumatic experiences.

Objectives:

- To address the subjugation of women in the Nigerian society
- To trace out the unhinged postcolonial traumatic psyche of the Nigerians
- To flash the light upon the stereotypical expectations and portrayal of women in the Nigerian society
- To bring out the struggles faced by women in the patriarchal society and as they move towards empowerment
- To trace how the characters with Afropolitan thinking try to embrace the reality of societal shackles concerning their lifestyle, sexuality, and modern thoughts

The primary sources taken for the study are the novels written by Sefi Atta, namely, *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), *Swallow* (2010) *A Bit of Difference* (2013) *The Bead Collector* (2019) and *The Bad Immigrant* (2021)

Methodology:

The theory of Womanism is widely applied in the study and the Postcolonial trauma theory with referential limits to Cathy Caruth’s Trauma Model. This research adopts formatting techniques and regulations that comply with the MLA Handbook – 8th edition.

The study is divided into five chapters including Introduction and Summation. The first chapter, Introduction, rolls out with a brief history of Nigerian literature and how it has evolved from oral to written literature. Oral traditions held a large portion of the data pertaining to Nigeria's past (Gardner 1990).

Along with the development of literature and the evolution of literary forms, academicians have also developed various ideologies and theories. One of the most significant theories is Womanism, a kind of feminism that naturally values women's contributions to society. Author and activist Alice Walker first used the term "womanist" in her 1982 book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. In addition to highlighting the achievements of all women, womanists pay particular attention to problems unique to black families, men, and women.

Womanism is not an extension of feminism but a theoretical framework independent of feminist theory. Alice Walker beautifully captures this idea by saying, “Womanism is to feminism as purple is to lavender.” This oft-quoted statement implies that womanism, a far more extensive ideological umbrella, is a subset of feminism. According to certain feminist movements, only white women are the target of their struggles, whereas womanism advocates equality for all women, including black women and minority groups. The coexistence of woman and man, while maintaining a distinctive culture is the major proposition of womanism.

Chapter 2 - Trauma of Postcolonial Experience

The postcolonial trauma theory offers a deeper understanding of the effects on the psyche of those who experienced colonial trauma, including slavery, forced migration, colonisation, and their consequences, particularly highlighting the postcolonial world's more recent twentieth and twenty-first centuries trauma. As every coin has two sides, postcolonialism leads to experiences

nurtured both on pros and cons; the pro being the education, transportation, and globalisation and the con being the over-commercialisation, heavy influence of the west over the native customs and tradition, and the forgoing of the same. This chapter is an ensemble of Atta's fiction studied under a singular idea of Cathy Caruth, a renowned Trauma Theorist. The referential limits are applied to the particular idea that postcolonial trauma results not only in physical destruction but also in mental destruction.

The characters like Enitan and Sheri from *Everything Good Will Come*, Deola Bello from *A Bit of Difference*, and Remi and her husband Tunde from *The Bead Collector* are the epitomai of this phenomenon. Enitan always looks up to her friend Sheri in all aspects of life, including fashion, courageous acts and life choices. In contrast, Sheri always mimics the 'Western style' of clothing, which is always termed contemporary images of beauty in media. This so-called 'standard beauty' is always the commercialised and sexualised female body.

Afropolitan experiences due to a little exposure to the west are exerted on the character called Deola Bello, who is a single and independent woman in her thirties. However, when it comes to adjusting to the cultural standards that are placed on Nigerian society, she becomes highly inadaptive. She eventually has an identity crisis as a result of her inability to express herself owing to the lifestyle choices she has made in Nigeria, the country of her origin.

Bandele Davis, who connects with the stream of ambivalent sexuality in the novel *A Bit of Difference*, travels to England to enroll in a respectable college. Bandele begins to destroy his original identity as soon as he lands in England to become a British citizen. He adopts all Western ways of thinking, behaving, and living. Atta gives a good description of his swift assimilation, "He sounded completely English, and all she [Deola Bello] knew about Nigerians who spoke that way was that they looked down on Nigerians who didn't" (45).

In *The Bead Collector*, the native characters are always suspicious of the people who are very much foreign to their land. Remi's remarks, "I could have told her that Nigerians were unapologetically insular," make it clear regarding the elite attitude and the impact of Nigeria's political and secluded upper class. She says, "We allowed foreigners into our lives only if they didn't add stress, and abandoned them the moment they did" (43). This does definitely highlight the residual colonial horror and the dire circumstances that pervaded Nigeria in the 1970s.

This is how their brains are wired - not to believe the foreigners or anticipate that something evil may happen due to the bitter past colonisation followed by the excruciating Civil War. The analysis has been made on the characters who have the incapacity to excise the western influence - mostly traumatising exposure - on them and constantly mull over the comparisons and judgments passed on the 'western' scale.

Chapter 3 - Delineation of Societal Expectations on Nigerian Women

The challenges that arise due to Nigeria's cultural legacy are numerous, including the effect of urbanisation, the spread of Christianity, importance given to business, civilisation, development, prevalent corruption, and antiquarians. The significant inequality that still prevails in Nigeria just the same as in the rest of the world, is gender inequality and the imposing societal expectations on women. Women and girls in most African communities have much less access to land and property than boys and men do. Without land, they cannot provide for their family's needs or make an income, perpetuating the poverty cycle for their offspring. The other typical unjust pattern is polygamy which is encouraged for men to proceed with but not by women.

Nigerian society is primarily a mixture of gender dynamics, where rebellious women are questioned and dragged to the invisible pressures on women. Even though the protagonist of *A Bit Difference*, Deola Bello, is quite content with her life and work abroad, she is still seen as an

incomplete woman because of her unmarried status. In *Swallow*, Tolani's mother is criticised for not abiding by traditional expectations and for her rebellious acts like riding a bike.

The different notions of expectations for both men and women are dynamic. Women are expected to be prettier and abide by the decisions of the man of the family. The mindset is exquisitely reflected through Arike's words, "If you were charming and acted a little stupid, you could get anything out of him. Unfortunately, Sister Kunbi had not learned that womanly trick" (125). Taking her mother's life as inspiration, Tolani tries not to 'swallow' the oppression but to 'vent out' the male domination and inequality imposed on her.

In a patriarchal world and patriarchal minds, feminism is always related to something that tears down the other gender, and the daring sexualisation of women is done by men. In*The Bad Immigrant,* the male protagonist Lukmon echoes this thought when he says about Ranti Shombi, "She was feminist back then, yet she was always in one revealing outfit or another. She walked as if she were daring someone to call her a slut and made every woman around her look boyish" (202).

Therefore, by portraying her characters, especially the female characters, Atta tries to reconstruct the social norms in a patriarchal society.

Chapter 4 - Women's Sense of Self-worth and Social Change

Through many societal issues, women's empowerment equips and enables them to make life-altering decisions. They could have the chance to redefine gender roles in the context of the changing socio-economic and political scenario, providing them greater flexibility to accomplish their objectives. Moreover, self-realisation in women becomes an achievable characteristic when the extended support from woman to woman is rendered for the betterment of each other. Sefi Atta infuses a narrative pattern in such a way that she weaves the duality of women characters

through the portrayal of the protagonist and the secondary female characters in almost all the novels. The protagonist lives as a typical woman abiding by societal expectations and following the traditions. On the other hand, the secondary female character is always rebellious and does not blindly follow societal presuppositions based on gender dynamics.

The story of *Everything Good Will Come* traces the steady growth of Enitan as she undertakes her journey towards self-realisation. The novel is not only a portrayal of Enitan's journey towards self-realisation but also a representation of every Nigerian woman's individual struggle. The beginning of her sense of self-worth reflects when she says, "Human rights were never an issue till the right of men were threatened" (193).

In *A Bit of Difference,* Deola Bello is an independent-minded single woman living and working in London. Despite her successful career, she faces the societal pressure and expectations of being married and raising children. This reflects the general state of women irrespective of their location in this cosmopolitan world. She grows through the culture and stands empowered amidst the racial discrimination and societal expectations on women.

Chapter 5 - Summation

Sefi Atta's exquisite portrayal of her female characters indirectly conveys that female assertiveness can be achieved depending on the educational level and economic freedom given to women. Atta orients her women to not 'swallow' the gender oppression but to 'vent out', that is, to voice out against the oppression to break themselves free from the chains of gender bias. A woman should voice out her opinions not only for herself but also for other women. Every man and woman should know their culture and establish their identities to attain self-reliance, self-realisation and empowerment.

Scope for Further Study:

Further potential studies can be conducted on:

- Analysis of Bourgeois society in Nigeria
- The post-colonial trauma in Nigeria
- The torn-apart minds in between the acculturation of Nigerians
- The study of Womanism in African fiction

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